BOOK REVIEW

Radical Shakespeare: Politics and Stagecraft in the Early Career. *Chris Fitter.* New York: Routledge, 2012. Pp. xi+330.

My copy of *Radical Shakespeare* is heavily marked up on virtually every page, mainly approvingly, but with not a few argumentative question and exclamation marks in the margins as well. The book brings several (relatively understudied) archives to bear on the interpretation of Shakespearean drama (and, by implication, Renaissance drama generally). Massively and scrupulously researched, it lays to rest depoliticizing readings of Shakespeare that ought to have been retired some years ago. But Chris Fitter's ambitious study also regularly overreaches and, as a result, to my mind at least, ends up with some quite untenable judgments about particular plays.

Radical Shakespeare directs our attention to bodies of medieval and Renaissance discourse that have yet to be given their due in relation to Shakespeare's politics. These discursive traditions comprise popular and learned critiques of social and economic injustice that supplied Shakespeare's contemporaries with a potent resource for the critique of a hard-hearted, selfish, and (Fitter makes clear) increasingly repressive and violent ruling class, one that enthusiastically used parish administrations to terrorize the poor and unemployed. Bringing this archive squarely into view is the most important service the book does for the contemporary study of the literature of the English Renaissance. The intellectual traditions Fitter excavates for us here include those of Christian socialism—he quotes Ambrose ("The earth was made in common for all" [16]) and Chrysostom ("This is robbery: not to share one's resources" [15]); radical humanist and "Commonwealth" attacks on avaricious and tyrannical elites, along with calls for a social order embodying the social teaching of Christ; republican and anti-absolutist thought that countenanced resistance to ungodly or illegitimate rulers; and, above all, an immemorially ancient tradition of popular anger

at the wealthy. This latter material in particular makes for fascinating reading. Fitter cites "a Kentish worker" who declared in 1598 that he "hoped to see such warre in this realme to afflicte the rich men of this countrye to requite their hardness of heart towards the poore" (6) and a laborer who said of Elizabeth that "I woulde to god she were dead that I might shytt on her face" (111).

One of the most impressive aspects of the book is its extensive and detailed presentation of the large-scale social and economic realities of the period. Recent literary study of the early modern period has prided itself on being hardheadedly materialist and historicist, yet it is remarkable how seldom such mundane phenomena as, say, levels of hunger, poverty, and unemployment, or fluctuations in real wages, or the operations of the Poor Laws, enter into even supposedly left-wing (usually rather abstruse) considerations of Elizabethan literature. Fitter observes a "dazzled reverence for courtliness" (111) among New Historicist critics (perhaps the sort of attitude that comes naturally to ambitious, career-minded academics mindful of who's in and who's out), and intellectual historians of the period he sees as comparably charmed by the discourse of those at the top of the heap (26). Fitter provides a much-needed corrective to such tunnel vision. His book welcomes the people back into Shakespeare studies.

Undoubtedly the most heterodox aspect of *Radical Shakespeare* is its solid emphasis upon the centrality of social class to early modern life. For decades, perhaps especially since the collapse of the states of "actually existing socialism," critics of English Renaissance literature have been warned off focusing on socioeconomic divisions as being somehow an anachronistic, vulgar, and reductive approach to the period. Where literary criticism has been "political" it has been so in the post-Marxist, '60s sense of the word, that is, as a form of identity politics focused on race, sexuality, and gender, relations of inequality that are in principle perfectly remediable under capitalism. Fitter rejects the intellectual taboo surrounding class. Drawing on recent "post-revisionist" (10) social and economic history of Tudor and Stuart England (such as that of Andy Wood), work demonstrating the fundamental importance of conflict between rich and poor in the period, Fitter shows again and again how Shakespearean texts engage directly with this issue—and always on the side of the dispossessed and downtrodden. Detailed and searching analysis reveals a Shakespeare who was nothing less than an "activist" (252) and "protest playwright" (80).

Here an especially fruitful technique is continually to pose what seems (only now that Fitter has done it, of course) a rather obvious question: what would this line, this speech, this episode or scene have meant to an audience of hungry, ill-housed, frequently disciplined or harassed commoners? In other words, what would the groundlings have made of it? This question is a guiding thread for Fitter, and the answers to it that he comes up with

are frequently a revelation, enabling us to notice things in Shakespeare that previously we skipped over. For instance, Fitter points out in a suggestive reading of *2 Henry VI* that the spectacle of a prosperous and well-fed gentleman, priding himself on the "quiet walks" of his walled garden and then killing a starving man (Cade) who had (in however wayward and sometimes cynical a way) articulated popular grievances, is likely to have seemed rather less appealing to an audience of servants, mechanics, or laborers than it might have to, say, a magistrate bent on enforcing the paranoically cruel Tudor vagrancy laws. And what might it mean to that same group of desperately poor spectators when Capulet, for instance, calls for "twenty cunning cooks" for his feast (161)? Repeatedly Fitter shows how such details may have channeled plebeian resentment against elite characters or at least fostered a skeptical, withholding attitude toward them. It is a technique too, I am afraid, that not infrequently leads him astray, in some respects disastrously so.

Here, I think, the problem is that Fitter works with too monological a conception of plebeian response—as if almost any well-to-do character was automatically a candidate for Shakespeare's populist "theatrical targeting" (203). This overly rigid view of what an audience of the common people might be capable of thinking about elite figures leads Fitter to give unrecognizable accounts of them that ruin the plays in which they appear. It simply does not strike me as possible that Shakespeare intended the generally attractive Orlando (Rosalind likes him well enough, anyway) in *As You Like It* to come across as "shrill with self-pity because he is not rich enough" or as unleashing at the beginning of the play "a torrent of class snobbery" (201). (Is this the youth Duke Frederick worriedly describes as loved of the people and who faithfully tends his servant Adam?) As for Adam, Fitter presents him as a "censorious gerontocrat" (208) and mouthpiece for killjoy puritan officials who hated maypoles, and all because Adam did not get drunk as a youngster (see 207–8), a judgment that may strike even those of us who like a drink as a bit harsh. Orlando's moving praise of Adam as someone who "sweat[s] for duty, not for meed" is dismissed as a piece of "ideology," that is, a self-serving attack on workers who would like to be paid with actual wages rather than fine words (209). We are apparently supposed to find in Iago's nasty contempt for "duteous and knee-crooking knaves" the true note of popular rebellion (206), an alarming thought that might suggest that revolutions will always end up pretty much as Yeats gloomily imagined them to do:[1]

> Hurrah for revolution and more cannon-shot!
> A beggar upon horseback lashes a beggar on foot.

1. W. B. Yeats, "The Great Day," in *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* (London: Macmillan, 1982), 358.

> Hurrah for revolution and cannon come again!
> The beggars have changed places, but the lash goes on.

Surely what Shakespeare is actually doing in Orlando's beautiful speech is evoking a world undistorted by the cash nexus and profit motive. Similar problems emerge in Fitter's strangely hostile account of Romeo. He is apparently a "domineering lord" (164), full of "open contempt" for the famished apothecary, seeing in the latter only a "tool" for his own "shady dealings" (164); later, in the note he gives to Balthasar for his father, he is guilty of "fingering" this impoverished shopkeeper, thus putting the audience in mind of the actions of a "government informer" (171). How one gets back from that to a sense of the romantic power of the play and its two protagonists I have no idea. These are readings that do not so much open up new topical meanings in the plays as turn them upside down.

Despite such lapses, however, this is a significant, sometimes wrongheaded, but always closely and passionately argued book that makes a persuasive case for a populist, oppositional Shakespeare that conservative (as well as antisocialist "theoretical" and "historicizing") approaches have prevented us from seeing. I look forward eagerly to Fitter's promised volume on Shakespeare's later career.

Peter Holbrook
University of Queensland